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**The New School, CARE & Ajkem'a Loy'a: A case study in learning in intensive and immersive global programs and in cross-cultural and bilingual collaborative work**

ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the challenges and opportunities, and suggests best practices in collaborations across year-levels, programs and divisions of a university; in external partnerships between a university and a large non-profit organization; in teaching and learning in intensive and immersive global programs; and in cross-cultural and bilingual collaborative work.



During the month of June 2008, 14 students, 2 faculty, and 1 project coordinator from The New School (TNS) lived and worked in the small lake-side village of San Lucas Tolimán, Guatemala, to collaborate with a group of Mayan artisan women, Ajkem'a Loy'a (AL.) The students and faculty represent a broad range of undergraduate and graduate academic programs at a university in the United States, and were investigating if and how the Guatemalan women could organize themselves and structure a business to create a sustainable form of generating income via the sale of their artisan goods in local and global markets.

KEYWORDS

Design education, interdisciplinary, cross-disciplinary learning, collaborative learning, multicultural, multilingual, humanitarian design, economic development

**CONTEXT**

The *Design for the Other 90%* exhibition website states that

“Of the world’s total population of 6.5 billion...90%, have little or no access to most of the products and services many of us take for granted.”

This statistic offers a responsibility and an opportunity for educational institutions to specifically engage students in collaborations that will ameliorate this statistic. There has been much engagement from the disciplines in the Social Sciences, particularly around economic development, but art and design institutions have not, until very recently, started to understand the positive impact design can have in underserved communities. Case studies, such as those documented by UNESCO, have also demonstrated that design can play “an important role in encouraging environmentally sustainable and economically viable models...of marginalized groups.” (Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S.A., UNESCO 2005, 6)

In 2007, the global humanitarian organization CARE and The New School (TNS) embarked on a long term collaborative project to empower a group of Mayan women in Guatemala—Ajkem’a Loy’a (AL)—by helping them develop a business model to export their handcrafted products to the United States.

The village of San Lucas Toliman in Guatemala was selected as the site for the initial pilot project due to AL’s:

- Existing partnership with CARE
- All women’s participation. Here we rely on research indicating that “If the goals of economic development include improving the general standard of living...then it is natural to work through women.” (Yunnus 2007, 72)
- Relatively young membership
- High literacy levels
- Interest in taking advantage of globalization to improve their business opportunities.

## ***FEASIBILITY STUDY***

Several meetings in Summer 2007, led to a trip to Guatemala with representatives from TNS and CARE to meet with AL, and culminated in the publication of a feasibility study (Berdiel and Dehejia 2007) which outlines opportunities, challenges, and insights which informed the project for 2008.

The women of AL lacked many of the skills required to convert their vision into reality. They did not have a real understanding of:

- Basic business skills like business development, marketing, sales, accounting, inventory and quality control
- Western market requirements or design trends
- The necessary skill sets (sewing, patternmaking, sizing) to produce a finished product

The study also established the goals of

- Improving AL's business, organizational and design skills through training workshops.
- Enhancing the academic experiences of the students involved by providing hands-on learning opportunities.
- Developing a "Designed by" business model, which elevates women in developing countries to a new economic and social position by playing a pivotal role in the actual design of the products.
- Creating a business that is sustainable for the women and the communities we engage.
- Preserving and strengthening the women's culture, heritage and traditions.
- Providing a model that can be replicated and scaled up within Guatemala and other countries.
- Linking to women in the U.S. in a way that supports furthering the movement to overcome global poverty.

Often, designers will participate with a group of artisans under the “Made by” model in which the designer offers the creative direction, which is executed by the artisans, who are thus limited to the role of manufacturer, making products by hand. These women have relatively small input into what product is made, or why it is made. The underlying issues with the “Made by” model are:

- The women do not develop their skills beyond the physical, hands-on making of the products
- The women are not learning about the market or design industry
- The women often receive a very small percentage of profit
- The women become dependent on the person/people playing the role of the designer, thus compromising the self-sustainability of the project

In the “Designed by” concept, women in developing countries are elevated to a new social/economic position by playing a pivotal role in the actual design (in cooperation with and advised by a budding designer) of the products. This approach provides the women with the skills to design their own products and move up the value chain of designers rather than just manufacturers. (Craft Revival Trust, Artesanías de Colombia S.A., and UNESCO 2005, 8) Trained in the necessary skills (quality control, product design and development, business and organizational skills), the women can have the opportunity to be creative and develop products that reflect their heritage while appealing to external markets. The key concept here is to increase exposure for the Mayan women (and eventually others), adding value to what they have produced for generations, in the hope of preserving their culture, heritage and traditional skills.

### ***CURRICULUM***

The pedagogical emphasis of this collaboration has been to establish an equal exchange between all participants. With this value as a priority, faculty from TNS’s Graduate Program in International Affairs (GPIA) and several programs

at Parsons The New School for Design structured a Spring 2008 course as a prerequisite for a month long immersive Summer 2008 program in Guatemala. It was critical to demystify the notion of a single expert in this project due to its interdisciplinary nature, and be able to create an equal field of questions, skills, and knowledge to which all participants (students and faculty) could contribute and learn from. In terms of design, the approach taken is that described by Thackara in his book *In the Bubble: Designing in a Complex World*, "In today's ultra-networked world, it makes more sense to think of design as a process that continuously defines a system's rules rather than its outcomes." (Thackara 2005) It was therefore critical to recruit students with a variety of skills, backgrounds, and interests for the course. An application process was established to ensure a high quality of students, and resulted in a mix of six students from International Affairs, three from Fashion Design, three from Integrated Design, two from Design and Management, one from Fashion Marketing, and one from Graphic Design (see Figure 1).

This mix of students and the nature of the project lend itself for an integrative learning environment. "Integrative learning is an umbrella term for structures, strategies, and activities that bridge numerous divides, such as ... general education and the major, introductory and advanced levels, experiences inside and outside the classroom, theory and practice, and disciplines and fields." (Klein 2005, 1)



*Figure 1: Faculty and students, Spring 2008 TNS course*

The fifteen-week Spring 2008 course was designed as a weekly lecture series with guest experts on Guatemalan history and culture, marketing & consumers, basic business skills, design & artisanship, and workshop development. During weeks 6-10, students engaged in a pilot run of the intensive summer project. Working in three teams, of approximately six members each, students developed prototypes of actual designs, as well as lesson plans for the summer workshop series in Guatemala:

- *Business*, which explored possible ways in which the women in Guatemala could organize themselves, as well as established a pricing model that could be used for all artisan products.
- *Marketing and Communication*, which designed a variety of materials through which to market the story of the Guatemalan women, and the creation of their products. They also prototyped a variety of possible brand names, logos, and tag systems.
- *Product Development*, which prototyped a variety of designs based on their knowledge of the women's current craft skills and access to materials. The intention was to demonstrate innovation through minor

changes to current products woven on the back strap loom, as well as explore possibilities for interaction between the women who weave and those who bead.

In final anonymous course evaluations students responded positively to the “expert-less” learning environment with comments such as (in response to “What did your instructor do best?”) “facilitate class,” “they were bringing in great, relevant speakers,” and “I mostly appreciate how they are really letting us run a lot of the design.”

The student teams were constituted from an online survey in which students were asked to select their first and second choice of teams in which to participate, based on both the skills they would bring to the collaboration process as well as what they were most interested in learning. From the work accomplished in the Spring, the mix in the teams proved useful and productive. A student’s response to the course evaluation identified “community building” and “collaboration between different Parsons departments and Parsons with GPIA” as one of the course’s strengths. However, a comment in one of the final course evaluations that the “market team could have used someone with a design background” demonstrates the potential pitfalls of this democratic system for interdisciplinary team building, in which one of the teams was left void of an essential required skill.

Finally, the success of the Spring 2008 course can be assessed with regards to how well it prepared the group for the month-long immersive program in San Lucas. To that effect, students commented that “ [the required/reading research was] good background for [the] trip,” and “I’m really excited for the trip so ask me then [what my overall evaluation for the course is.] But I think this will be one of my most memorable courses.”

Although with a lot of assumptions and uncertainty about what exactly would happen upon the group’s arrival in Guatemala, students developed an

extensive curriculum of workshops (in business, marketing, design and product development) to offer to the women of AL. How well the Spring course prepared each team was demonstrated through how little involvement the faculty had in the pre-workshop preparations once on site with members of AL.

### ***IMMERSIVE INTENSIVE PROGRAM IN GUATEMALA***

The collaboration in San Lucas Tolimán was originally planned in two parts: two weeks of workshops delivery focusing on skill building (see Figure 2), and two weeks for collaborative development of new artisan products.



*Figure 2: AL & TNS participating in a design concept exercise*

The first session between TNS and AL revolved around introductions, followed by presentations from each group on what half-day workshops (established based on AL's daily availability) would be offered, after which everyone had an opportunity to sign up for as many as they liked. Below is the final schedule (all workshops were taught by TNS students under faculty



supervision, except for those highlighted in pink which were taught by the women of AL, see Figure 3):



*Figure 3: AL overseeing two TNS students in a beading workshop*

**PLANNED SCHEDULE: AJKEM'A LOY'A + THE NEW SCHOOL - JUNE 2008**

Week 1	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
9AM-12PM			Brand, colors, shapes & symbols, logo development (P)	Work time valuation + product pricing (P)	Design & Fabrication (APM)	Savings, inventory (APM)
2PM-5PM			Brand, colors, shapes & symbols, logo development (P)	Work time valuation + product pricing (P)	Design & Fabrication (APM)	
Week 2	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
9AM-12PM	Mostacilla + Kaqchikel (APM)	How to make a pattern or design (P)	Weaving: napkins and scarves 9am-2pm Romelia y Gloria (APM)	Sewing (P)	Measurements, sizing, and quality control (P)	Store and the Association's organization (APM)
2PM-5PM	Mostacilla + Kaqchikel (APM)	How to make a pattern or design (P)	Weaving: napkins and scarves Catarina (APM)	Sewing (P)	Measurements, sizing, and quality control (P)	
Week 3	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
9AM-12PM	English, computers (P)	How to design workshops for tourists (APM)	Begin product development (APM)	English, computers (P)	English, computers (P)	
2PM-5PM	English, computers (P)	How to design workshops for tourists (APM)	Begin product development (APM)	Weaving: Dora, Ruth, Catarina (APM)	English, computers (P)	
Week 4	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
9AM-12PM	Product development / Plan final event	Product development / Plan final event	Product development / Plan final event	Final Event		
2PM-5PM	Product development / Plan final event	Product development / Plan final event	Product development / Plan final event	Final Event		

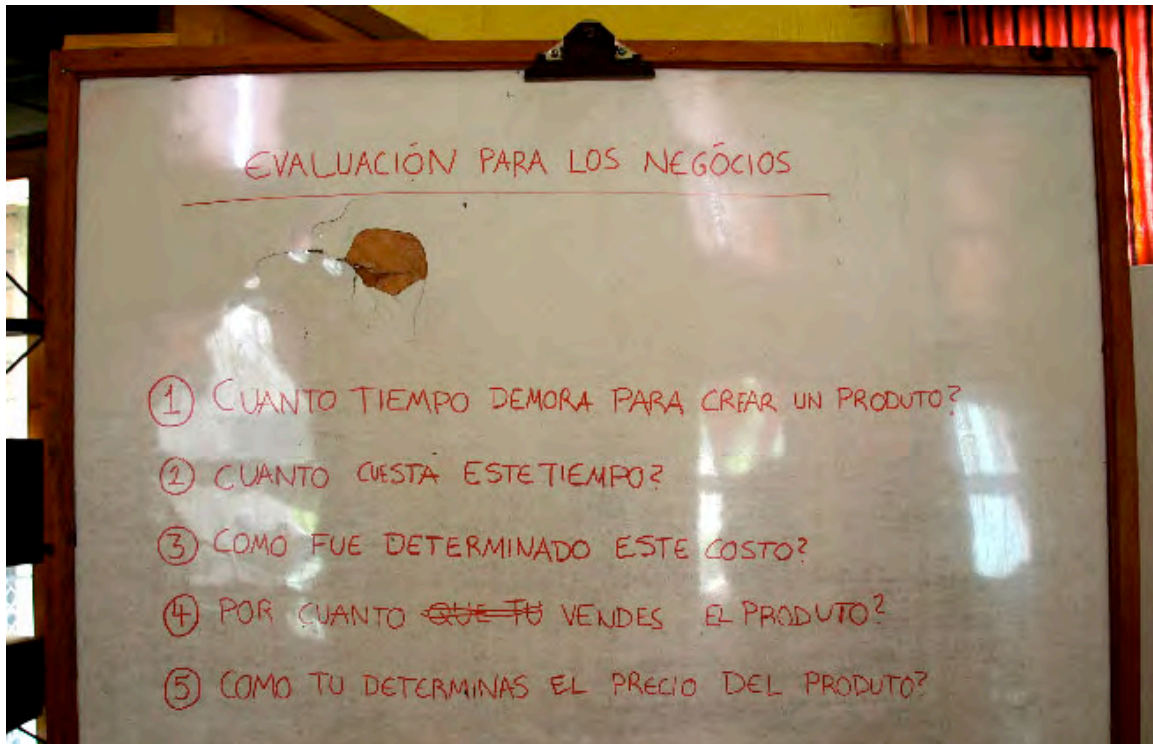
**LEGEND**

Ajkem'a Loy'a Workshops
Product Development Team
Marketing Team
Business Team

**LOCATIONS**

Anexo Posada Molina (APM)
Pavarotti (P)

To measure the success of each workshop, a monitoring & evaluation procedure was put into place. Each student team determined 3-6 questions to ask each workshop participant at the outset (see Figure 4). At the end of the month, all AL participants were asked 19 questions that summed up the overall learning goals from all of TNS-led workshops, in particular to understand if active learning could be demonstrated in the 11 areas of work time valuation, pricing, inventory, quality control, the association's organization, new product development, patternmaking, sewing, marketing, computers, and English.



*Figure 4: Monitoring and evaluation questions, Time Valuation workshop*

Although there were only 8 participants present during the final evaluation day of the project (and an average of 11 participated in each workshop throughout the month), the process offers enough specific and general information to make conclusions about the learning that occurred and, in particular, inform next steps for the continuation of the collaboration. As detailed in the table below, there was active learning demonstrated in eight areas – work time valuation, inventory, quality control, new product

development, patternmaking, sewing, computers and English. In three of the areas, pricing, marketing, and the association's organization, this evaluation demonstrates some learning, but with a need of further emphasis to have a unified approach and understanding of these three areas.

MONITORING &  
EVALUATION  
Ajkem'a Loy'a + The New  
School

Guatemala, June 2008

LEGEND:

Active learning demonstrated
Some learning, although not full scope, demonstrated
Inconclusive or no learning demonstrated

	BEFORE (An average of 10 respondents per workshop)	AFTER (8 Repondents)	CONCLUSIONS
1. How do you value your time? For example, what is the cost you assign to the time that you spend working, either weaving, beading, sewing, or teaching workshops?	25Q per day set as an avg. wage in San Lucas Toliman - no concept of hourly wage	88% of respondents had a notion of "value" of time	Increased notion of valuing time.
2. How did you calculate that value or the cost of your time?	same as in #1	50% of respondents indicated cost of materials plus time spent 38% referred to the value of time spent	Increased notion of valuing time.
3. How do you determine the price of your products?	Although all the women responded that the cost for their time was Q25 per day, when asked about how they determined the price of their product, they would use factors like size and quality of materials as determinants for the price, time was rarely taken into account. They had standard prices for their products: small napkins: Q15, medium-large napkins Q75-100, scarves: Q100-150, guipiles: Q400-600 depending on the quality of the thread.	Similar to before. Only 13% of respondents indicated factoring time.	Valuing time does not yet necessarily translate to pricing model, which still heavily relies on material costs and market competition.
4. What is an inventory?	Only three responses.	100% of respondents were able to correctly definte inventory.	Inconclusive
5. How do you keep control of the inventory, either the store's or your own products?	Reference to notebook they use.	Varied answers - all complementary and related to inventory control.	Inconclusive
6. What does quality control consist of? How would you define it? What aspects do you keep in mind to determine if a product is ready to be sold as good quality?	42% of respondents didn't know/didn't answer the question.	100% of respondents correctly responded.	Increased notion of quality control.

7. What is the purpose of having standards of product quality?	33% didn't know/didn't answer. 33% related quality control to sales and customer satisfaction.	75% of respondents correctly answered the question. 50% of respondents related quality control to sales and customer satisfaction.	Increased notion of the importance of quality control for the sales of their work.
8. Why is it important to have these standards?	Too similar to #7	Too similar to #7	Inconclusive
9. How is the Ajkem'a Loy'a Association organized? What are the different roles & responsibilities? Why is it necessary to have these roles and responsibilities?	100% of precise knowledge of roles & responsibilities as constituted before the collaboration.	38% correctly described the new roles & responsibilities. These three respondents are also three who have an active role in the association.	The majority of the women could not correctly describe the new roles & responsibilities. Knowledge of association directly relates to their individual active participation.
10. As an association, what are the products you wish to make or produce to sell?	Only 1 respondent.	75% of respondents referred to products they were not producing before the collaboration (skirts for girls, things for the kitchen, bags and blouses, blouses for children, table runners with natural dyes, shorts, pants, clothes for children.)	Demonstrates active thinking around new product development, although no unified vision.
11. What are some ideas for new products that you have after this month of workshops?	Was not asked previously.	100% of responses demonstrated active thinking about new products such as "to make new designs for bags and dresses for girls" "To unite the compañeras to make new products. Bags with typical materials, old and new." "Children's clothes, bags." "To make pillowcases, learn to dye with pitaya to have new colors." "The desire is to improve the things that we did not know before." "New products of chupan" "Pants, gabachas, clothes for children, shirts." "Typical attires old and new."	Demonstrates active thinking around new product development, although no unified vision.
12. What is a pattern?	All the women responded that they did not know what a pattern was and never drew their ideas prior to designing a product.	100% correctly responded, referring to a pattern being a "mold" to replicate designs.	Demonstrates specific skills gained around patternmaking.
13. What are patterns used for?	Was not asked previously.	SAME AS ABOVE	Demonstrates specific skills gained around patternmaking.
14. Do you know how to thread a sewing machine? Do you know how to wrap a bobbin?	Only 33% of participants had used a sewing machine before the workshop.	67% responded yes, 13% "a little"	Demonstrates specific skills gained around sewing
15. After the marketing workshops, what are some ideas you have to promote Ajkem'a Loy'a's workshops, store and products to attract clients?	57% refer to having "new products." 38% refer to either their logo or branding. 29% refer to what they want to communicate "That we are women fighting for a good future for our children."	38% no answer. 38% refer to promotion and publicity (2 respondents refer to the internet.) 25% refer to the store.	Inconclusive, although active thinking towards promotion and the use of the store.
16. In what way did the computer workshops help you?	83% of the women had never used a computer before.	38% expressed not learning much/anything. 62% all referred to learning how to use the internet and open	Positive activity towards internet knowledge & communications.

		an email account.	
17. Now that you've taken the computer workshop, for what would you use a computer?	See #16	38% to send emails. 25% to keep track of sales. 13% for the group. 21% no answer.	Active thinking around uses of a computer (makes a case for the association owning their own computer.)
18. Do you feel comfortable greeting and helping clients who speak English?	50% said no. 40% expressed interest but no knowledge.	63% Yes. 25% "Regular" 12% Not Really.	Positive activity towards learning basic English.
19. After the English workshop, do you feel prepared to use frequently used words in English to communicate with tourists?	Was not asked previously.	38% yes. 25% no answer. 37% very little.	Demonstrates not enough English skills to actively communicate. Willingness and desire to learn.

*TABLE: Complete results, monitoring and evaluation*

Language has been an issue throughout the collaboration. Not all students and faculty who traveled are fluent Spanish speakers, so there was a constant need for translation between English & Spanish. It was a definite challenge to not have dedicated translators in the team, and have to rely on Spanish speakers to undertake the double tasks of leading or participating in workshops, as well as translating. The Spanish speakers also encountered communication issues due to the level of schooling from the women in AL. Based on the assumption communicated by CARE, that all of the women would be able to read and write, workshop facilitators planned materials and activities that included reading and writing (see Figure 5). In actuality, at least three of the women had difficulty reading and writing independently. The women in AL helped their peers who had the most difficulty, but there was an observable lack of engagement with the learning process and overall project on the part of the less literate women.

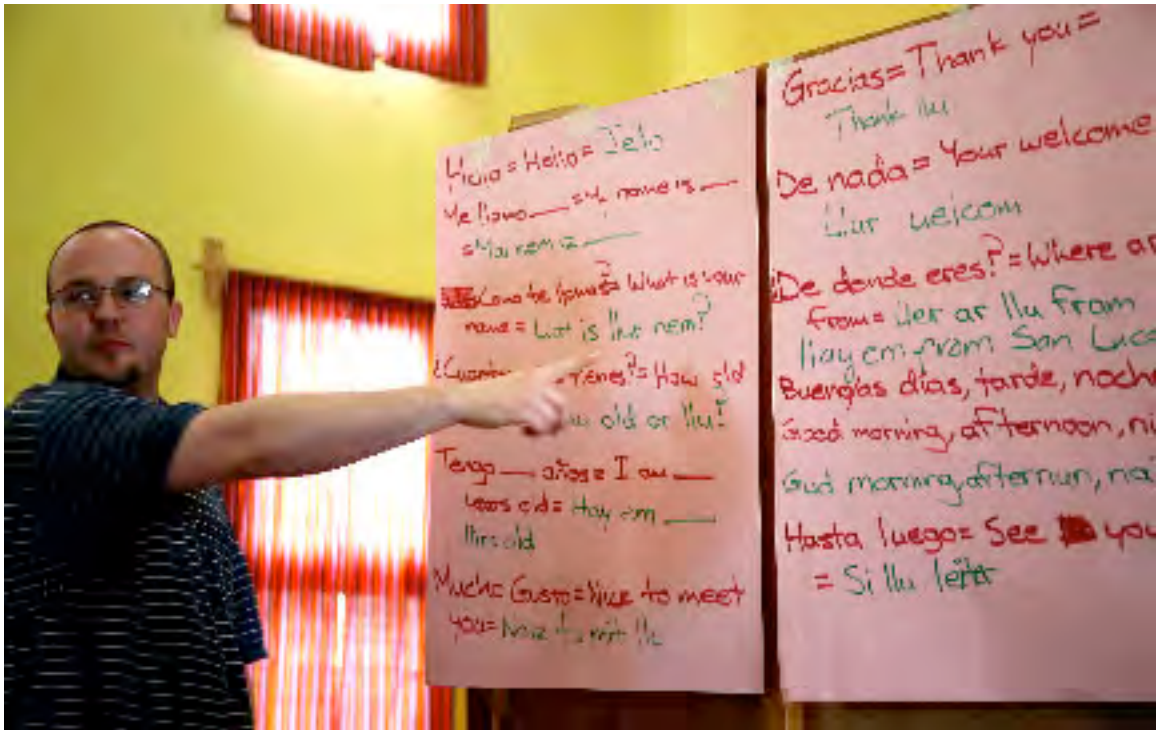


Figure 5: TNS student teaching Basic English workshop

An open discussion with all participants from TNS and AL at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of June dictated the last two weeks of the project. The conversation was prompted by participants from TNS asking each person to share what they saw as the biggest challenges thus far, and what they hoped to accomplish in the remaining two weeks.

Sandra, from Ajkem'a Loy'a, highlighted, "In the last two weeks, I have learned to think about new products and to value what we make and the price that we should charge for them... Thank you for your effort... We shouldn't undervalue what we sell and now I think about all our products and thinking about what is the fair price to charge for it."

The major challenge discussed by the women of AL was, as Romelia indicated, the fact that they were not working as an association. The current association's directives reported that many of their peers did not really deliver what they committed to, and that the association did not work with a sense of group nor unity. "[My goal for the next two weeks is] that the group

gets closer because I see the group very distant. When there is something to benefit from the group shows up but otherwise not. I want the group to organize better.”

Reyna, from Ajkem’a Loy’a, followed with another important aspect of how the project continued, “To have a design for the store and fix it. And I would like to see our group more united. Most *Guatemaltecos* say they will come and share responsibilities but when it comes down to business people not show up. ... That the group begins to be known, the store, the workshops, the distinct products that will be known because they are only made here.”

TNS concurred that AL functioning as an association should be a priority for the remaining two weeks. Autumn Grace, a student from TNS, reflected on this point, “From this discussion I have a new goal and that is to be a resource to the women. To help them talk about whatever is causing disunity in the group and help them work on how can they become successful as a group. Maybe there needs to be some minimum requirements to be in the group and if the group becomes smaller, that is ok ... I worry that the association has grown just to have more people and not for the benefit of the group.”

Finally, Dina, from AL, referred to learning – a core goal for the summer project. “... I want to be part of and support the group because I have learned by being part of it.”

In addition to developing new products, TNS proposed that AL think about imparting workshops for tourists on beading (see Figure 6) & weaving as a way to promote their heritage and tradition as well as generate income that would require less upfront investments of materials and time, as is the case with their artisan products.





*Figure 6: Test run of a Beading Workshop for tourists*

The midterm session concluded with the formation of three work groups:

1. *Workshops*: a team comprised of a TNS faculty and students, in collaboration with women from AL determined the content, programming, logistics, space, and cost of tourist workshops.
2. *Store & Branding*: a team comprised of a TNS faculty and students worked as design consultants for AL to redesign their store as a space to sell their products and teach tourist workshops, as well as redesign their logo (see Figure 7) to market their group with a strong image representing their values and craft.



*Figure 7: AL members discuss logo options in front of designs*

3. *Product Development*: a team of TNS faculty and students continued patternmaking and sewing workshops (see Figure 8) for AL in which they started to develop new products, such as handbags and garments for children.



*Figure 8: Sewing workshop taught by TNS students*

Additionally, the original student business team led two sessions for AL about their association, in which the team proposed a new structure that would both facilitate a stronger sense of group and unity, as well as support and continue the work started during the month long collaboration. After these sessions AL adopted:

1. A new horizontal structure for the association, which eliminated the positions of President & Vice-president, and democratized decision-

- making through the creation of additional positions such as Design Manager, Quality Control Manager, Store Manager, Communications Manager, and Workshops Manager. (Previously the positions were President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, Vocals, and Collaborators.) All positions now rotate on a 6-month basis.
2. A micro-credit in the amount of Q6631 (approximately U\$800), the sum of all the materials purchased for the summer collaboration with the project's initial funding (6 sewing machines, threads, patternmaking supplies, and all of the materials related to the store's redesign) which has to be repaid in a year at an interest rate of 24%, to a savings account in the association's name.

The assumption is that with rotating roles and financial investment in the association, women will be motivated to function as a group, strengthening the trust between them and thus ensuring a higher success rate for the group's future endeavors. This success rate has been clearly documented by micro credit endeavors around the world. (Yunnus 2007, 58)

The summer project culminated with:

1. The launch of the new AL logo, which was developed through a process of design & redesign with the women of AL as clients.



*Figure 9: Before and after logo designs for the AL Association*

2. The re-launch of the AL store in San Lucas Tolimán, which now presents itself as a space in which to buy handicrafts as well as to learn sewing, weaving (see Figure 10), beading, and jewelry making.



*Figure 10: Weaving workshop in newly redesigned store*

3. A bilingual promotional brochure describing the content and cost of tourist workshops. This brochure was printed with a donation from the local Hotel Tolimán, which now sees itself as a partner to market the workshops to tourists in the area.
4. A more democratic and robust structure for the association to function as a business.



*Figure 11: Daughter of an AL member drawing*

5. An unplanned and unpredicted active engagement with the daughters of the AL members, with whom the students and faculty took turns engaging in creative activities such as drawing, designing, and even

sewing. On the last day in San Lucas, one of the *compañeras* shared with the group that her daughter was unable to hold a pencil before we arrived, and she was now asking for pencil and paper at home on a daily basis (see Figure 11). Recent media campaigns, such as *The Girl Effect*, are raising awareness about the positive and grand impacts that working with girls can have.



6. Several new products developed during June 2008 (see Figure 12), each of which was started in one of the workshops run by the student design team.
7. A tentative return date of October/November for a group from TNS to check-in on the progress of workshops & products from AL.

*Figure 12: Children's dress designed by AL member during June 2008*

### **CONCLUSIONS/NEXT STEPS**

The collaboration between TNS and AL is an ideal project for a university such as The New School. This project requires the participation of experts from a variety of fields and therefore facilitates a natural cross-divisional collaboration even in a large university. The intensive and team-based nature of the collaboration also lends itself to bringing together groups of students from a variety of programs and year-levels.

The project's next steps include

1. Monitor AL's repayment of the micro credit for which they signed up
2. Develop a second phase of the project that fully supports and explores tourist workshops as a form of income generation. Topics in this project (based on the results from the monitoring and evaluation set in place during Summer 2008) could include further English workshops,

- computer workshops, face to face and online promotion, user-centered research (what do tourists look for?), market research (what is the competition landscape for workshops?), business strategy (with whom and how could/should AL partner to promote their work), and further design workshops and product development (with a key focus on how teaching their skills can open possibilities for new creations with their craft.)
3. Work with AL's core members to continue a phone and email/internet communication and offer feedback at a distance
  4. Establish roles and responsibilities across The New School and CARE so as to build on, and not distract from, the work accomplished in the Summer

One of the biggest challenge TNS will continue to face in this project relates to training the women of AL to become designers ("Designed by" model.) This is definitely an ongoing effort that will need to be addressed through many more skill-building workshops as well as charrette-like collaborative sessions between AL and design students or faculty.

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